

**MARK'S TERRIFYING RESURRECTION; MARK 16:1-8; APRIL 12, 2009 –  
EASTER SUNDAY; THOMAS H. YORTY, WESTMINSTER PRESBY. CHURCH**

The reading Gwen offered this morning sounded reasonable enough: complete sentences, a coherent story. But, in fact, in the original Greek the text is not at all that tidy.

The first eight verses of Mark 16 report the resurrection of Jesus, but verse 8 simply ends midstream with the preposition “for,” in Greek “gar” – a word which normally comes second in a clause of several or many words.

In the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of Mark nothing follows the word gar. No appearances of Jesus after the report of his resurrection. No get together in Galilee. Nothing. It is as if the writer vanished or was struck dumb.

The incompleteness of this ending prompted the early church to add both a shorter and longer ending to the Gospel: verses 9 -11 and 12 - 20. No biblical scholar questions that these accounts of Jesus appearing first to Mary Magdalene then to two disciples and finally to the eleven were add-ons by a later author.

And so because Mark is the oldest account of Jesus' life and the primary source of Luke's and Matthew's information this abrupt, incomplete ending in the original manuscript, depicting the women scattered in terror is intriguing if not troubling.

You might say we have a literary problem – the incomplete text; and a theological problem – the overwhelming terror of the women. But my hunch is that verse 8 is a clue that explains both. “Then they went out and ran away from the tomb, beside themselves with *terror*. They said nothing to anybody, for they were *afraid*.”

Fear. Fear is the reason the women scattered and fear is the reason the writer stopped in his tracks. Whatever happened on the first Easter morning was out of the ordinary to say the least. Speech-stopping fear results when your brain cannot process some event.

And I can tell you it wasn't just the women who were afraid. My attempts to find biblical commentaries and preacherly wisdom on this unsettling conclusion of Mark's Gospel has been fairly fruitless.

Only one commentator confronted the terror of the women head on. Most seem to take the easy way out focusing not on that dangling preposition but on the accounts of Jesus showing up again in Galilee.

I'd like to park on this moment in Mark and consider fear—almost like the layers of an onion—because I believe that in this very human reaction we may find some connection to these poor, terrified women and insight into our own lives.

Perhaps the most obvious terror in this account is in response to a deeply holy encounter. Terror in the bible often results from such moments: Moses, Elijah, the prophets of Baal. Paul blinded on the road to Damascus.

The great student of comparative religion Rudolf Otto says what else could it be but fear when we face what he calls the *Mysterium Tremendum*? Dread, awe, a sense of Wholly Other that falls outside what is familiar and known. This is the fear of inexplicable, overwhelming power.

I remember as a grade school student being called to the principal's office one afternoon. I searched my mind for some sin I had committed and was fearful of going into the room behind the front desk where Miss Brenan, our large and ancient looking principal resided.

When I walked into her office, knees quivering, her stern face suddenly softened. She handed me a dollar bill and asked if I would go to the corner drug store after school and get her a strawberry milkshake. I could keep the change she said.

After carrying out my assignment I was glad to deliver the milkshake then leave her presence because she was if not our Creator, then our Sustainer and Redeemer. I'd seen her walk the playground, paddle in hand, invoking silence on hoards of rebellious students.

So it is not surprising that these women were frightened at first, at least by a tomb made empty by some power greater than death: an overwhelming power, the after glow of which was evident in the shimmering radiance of the angel who greeted them.

But there was I think another layer of fear that paralyzed these women. And this is the fear of what to do now that the familiar world, the comfortable realm of relationships and boundaries had been radically invaded and changed.

What *do you do*? We're getting a glimpse into this kind of anxiety and fear in the midst of our global fiscal crisis. *The New York Times* reports recently a steep rise in counseling services. Many people are making their first visit to a therapist; many who *still have jobs* but whose lives are tormented by the new and uncertain world we live in. When the old normal no longer applies how do you live? What can you count on?

I say the old normal has been invaded and shattered. It wasn't the money system that changed – scary as that has been for us. It was – and this is core of the “onion of fear” if you will – it was death itself that was dead. If you can't count on death what can you count on? If life doesn't bottom out with death what are the limits to life? Scary business!

William Butler Yeats wrote a play in which Lazarus attacks his old friend Jesus for raising him from the tomb where he'd thought himself safe to reside for eternity. He compares himself to a rabbit dragged out of its hole into the light of day to face the expectations of life. My solitude is gone he says.

You see, once resurrection it's not the old world anymore: the world invested in death; the world convinced the way to combat death is with more death; the world that responds to murder by killing the murderer. The eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth world, where violence and death redeem violence and death. We know that world.

Everything we do is geared to fighting death: health care, police and fire, armies and navies, insurance for every eventuality under the sun, seat belts, sun screen – you name it.

But at some point we know that death wins. And so our strategy is to protect life as long as we can then gracefully hopefully acquiesce to the grim reaper.

But if the grim reaper is trumped then we have to rethink not only our life strategy but realize what we're looking at is not limitation and finality but second chance and new

beginnings. I am not saying stop visiting your doctor or taking your vitamins. I am saying reconsider your life.

You see what we don't know until *this Sunday* is the world of resurrection. What today proclaims is that while everything looks the same, everything has changed. We order special flowers to trumpet this news. We prepare special music with lots of brass to make the exclamation. We listen again to the old story that proclaims the end of death.

But that is all we do here. We proclaim. What happens after this hour of worship is up to you and me. You see there is no difference between those three women and you and me. We've been to the tomb. We've heard the shout "He is Risen!" Now we have to decide what next.

If there is a tremor of tension in your belly don't shush it down or sweep it away. That impulse is real. What we know at some level of our consciousness is that when we go from here we have to face the same old world.

Perhaps being dragged, like Lazarus, into the light of a new day is the final fear. The fear of starting anew. But it's almost laughable. It is a fear that shouldn't exist because like the onion once you've peeled away all the layers nothing is there.

Here we are at the threshold of resurrection and we are stuck at the open door. Like the housefly that lingers on the window sill after you open the screen so that it can fly away. We're stuck in the old world.

But all we need to do to enter the world of resurrection is show up...at the dinner table or the office or the classroom...because those are the places where death has ruled.

I know one couple who showed up to interview a new school for their daughter. She struggled in public schools; they'd been to all kinds of counselors and therapists and had a list of diagnoses and labels as long as your arm.

Once they'd told the principal of the new school all of the things that were wrong with their daughter, the complicated psychological disorders and medications the principal looked them both square in the eye and said, "thank you for sharing that information, but it doesn't make any difference to us; our expectations for your daughter will be no different than they are for all of our students."

The couple said they went into a tail spin. Everything they said and did in raising their teenager was based on those labels; on the limitations and special needs and requirements. Suddenly, they had a new daughter, a new family really because the old house of limited hope or no hope came tumbling down. It was scary at first but when they discovered the old barriers didn't have to dictate their lives anymore everything changed.

Easter calls us to start anew in our ordinary lives. I'll never forget a painting class I took in college. One member of the class was a very large member of the football team. He was quite out of place among the counter-culture hippie-like art majors.

I remember watching him stare at the blank canvass the first time almost in shock as if he'd landed on another planet. Then something triggered in him; he started slapping paints on the canvass in primitive shapes.

With no artistic experience, he started using all kinds of crazy, wonderful colors and shapes. The professor used him as an example of how to be creative to the class who were afraid to be bold and experiment.

We move from one neighborhood or city to another. We lose one job and search for another. We spend our lives with a life partner and find ourselves sitting at an empty table. Or nothing much has changed except the date on the calendar.

They say that a blank page or a blank canvass can paralyze a writer or artist. But Easter calls us to start anew in our ordinary lives.

I remember someone saying to me that while she was in grief over the loss of her son, on a rainy, dreary day friends would often call and say, "I am thinking about you, I am sure that a day like today can be depressing for you." But she said that wasn't the way it was at all. The worst days were the bright sunny days, days which were typical, the days where she spent most of her life. On *those days* she realized her beloved son was no longer there. Those days hurt the most.

After the death of a loved one, a move, a job change, a divorce, a child going off to college or getting married the canvass is *very blank*. I'm convinced that's what Lazarus in that play did not, could not face.

How do you face not just the ordinary life you live with the hope of resurrection which is hard enough, but the world when you are a survivor after a loved one has died or you suddenly find yourself inhabiting an empty nest with your children gone and the house transformed from a home into a museum to their memory.

What will our worlds look like when we're the ones who have to wake up in the same bed, the same house, the same routine?

But then you can look at it this way. The great thing about the Gospel of Mark and his account of Easter is that he *doesn't finish it*; or the women who scatter to the hills *without spreading* the good news.

Easter is a story that waits to be finished in our lives and the life of the church. You and I are invited to pick up Mark's pen and start rewriting the rest of our lives. You and I are the ones with the message of the 'death of death' to tell because nearly everyone we know is desperate to find life waiting where we thought there was only grief or despair or loneliness.

When is an ending not the end? When a dead man rises from the tomb and a Gospel ends in the middle of a sentence; and you and I pick up the pen and follow our feet. And God says I'll give you a book of new life to write; I'll give you miles to go and people to see who will hang on every word and promise of resurrection. Amen.